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David Fergusson

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INTERPRETING THE RESURRECTION

by THE REV. DR DAVID FERGUSON

'O God, who by the resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ from the dead delivered us from the power of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of your love: grant that as by his death he has recalled us to life, so by his presence ever abiding in us he may raise us to joys eternal.'¹

THE language of Christian prayer reflects two central components of christology. One is the exclusive importance attached to a brief portion of history centring upon the death of Jesus, while the other is the assertion of his continuing presence to the believer. The ways in which these twin themes are articulated is nowhere more apparent than in the theology of the resurrection. In this respect the resurrection provides the most important case-study in Christian interpretation. The sense in which the history of Jesus is theologically significant and the sense in which he can be spoken of as present — these are partly illustrated and partly constituted by the interpretation of the resurrection.

What do we mean when we say that 'Jesus is risen'? For the sake of a coherent christology this question surely requires careful consideration yet in much of the literature it tends to be neglected or treated ambivalently. In what follows I shall attempt to outline the shape of three rival interpretations of the resurrection which lie at various stages on a possible spectrum of positions. I shall label them, for convenience' sake, radical, liberal and traditional. Each represents a constructive theological proposal and thus attempts to present an adequate interpretation of the NT understanding(s) of Jesus' resurrection. This claim to Christian adequacy provides an important criterion for assessing the merits of each position.

The rival interpretations can be clarified by posing the question: Is the resurrection an event in the life of Jesus or an event in the life of the believer? If it is the former, then the resurrection happens to Jesus independently of ourselves and is discovered to be the case. If it is the latter then it is created within or realised by the believer. The truth conditions attached to the assertion 'Jesus is risen' will vary according

¹ *New Every Morning* (BBC, London, 1983), p. 35.

to which of these two options are preferred, and this in turn will determine the extent of one's christological realism.²

The radical interpretation

This position is represented by Bultmann, Marxsen and others.³ Despite the fact that his writings contain little on the resurrection Bultmann's position is clear and follows inexorably from his stand on a number of related matters — the concept of miracle, our knowledge of God, the relationship between faith and history, and the application of historical criticism to the NT. In one place he clearly identifies belief in the resurrection with belief in the saving efficacy of the Cross — to confess that 'Jesus is risen' is essentially to realise that the Cross has been taken up into one's life and has become a reality of faith.⁴ In a famous sentence he speaks of Jesus as rising into the kerygma.

If the event of Easter Day is in any sense a historical event additional to the event of the cross, it is nothing else than the rise of faith in the risen Lord.⁵

From this remark it is apparent that the resurrection is not an event which belongs to the history of Jesus. The surface appearance of the gospel narrative is quite misleading. The history of Jesus culminates in his crucifixion, so that this is really the only significant thing that happens to him; the subsequent history of the NT period concerns the early church. The resurrection, therefore, belongs not so much to the history of Jesus as to that of the Christian faith.

There seem to me to be three types of consideration which typically motivate the radical position.

(1) The first is a hostility towards any notion of the miraculous. The idea of a divine intervention into the causal nexus of our space-time

² In the context of a discussion of the resurrection Donald MacKinnon has drawn attention to the significance of the dispute between realism and idealism for theology. *The Resurrection: A Dialogue*, Lampe and MacKinnon, (Mowbray, London, 1966), p. 110ff.

³ Rudolf Bultmann, 'The New Testament and Mythology' in *Kerygma and Myth I*, ed. Bartsch (SPCK, London, 1953), Willi Marxsen, *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth* (SCM, London, 1970); cf. John Knox, *The Death of Christ* (Collins, London, 1970), Appendix; Norman Perrin, *The Resurrection Narratives: A New Approach* (SCM, London, 1977), passim; Schubert Ogden, *Christ Without Myth* (Collins, London, 1962), Chapter IV; David Tracy, *Blessed Rage For Order* (Seabury Press, New York, 1975), p. 220.

⁴ 'Faith in the resurrection is really the same thing as faith in the saving efficacy of the cross': op. cit., p. 41.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 42. For a good exegesis of Bultmann's position on the resurrection see Ogden, op. cit., pp. 83-8.

world cannot be philosophically sustained. The hypothesis of a supernatural agent, employed to explain certain phenomena, is now redundant and discredited. It can never be reasonable to postulate an act of God as the cause of an otherwise inexplicable phenomenon. This hostility towards the miraculous also has a positive theological dimension. The idea of an interventionist God who occasionally breaches the natural order is problematic. Such a God would be haphazard and inscrutable, and we would be left with the impossible conundrum of why he should intervene in one situation but not in another. If intervention is a possibility, occasionally actualised, it becomes increasingly hard to speculate why it is conspicuously absent at some of the most critical moments in history. A less arbitrary and inscrutable God would impose total abstinence upon himself in this respect, and impart his presence in more constant and indirect ways.⁶ This is consonant with Bultmann's insistence that the reality of God cannot be read off from any 'objective' events in history, and leads into the second motivation governing the radical interpretation.

(2) There is no internal relationship between faith and history by which historical judgments could verify the truth claims of the Christian faith. In the same way as faith can never be established upon facts about the natural world, so it can never be based upon a survey of 'objective' historical events.⁷ For Bultmann faith cannot be grounded in any historical probability that Jesus said this or did that, and, *a fortiori*, the resurrection cannot be assimilated to reports about an empty tomb or a set of appearances. As such it would be reduced to a proof-miracle and would pre-empt the need for an existential decision in response to God's word.

Given this theological aversion to 'objective' history, it is essential that the resurrection belongs to the life of the believer. The radical separation of faith and history leads to the location of the former in the interior of the existential self. As an event disclosing the significance of Jesus' death the resurrection is co-extensive with the rise of faith in the

⁶ That this is a consideration which held sway with Bultmann is brought out by Hans Jonas in his essay 'Is Faith Still Possible: Memories of Rudolf Bultmann and Reflections on the Philosophical Aspects of His Work', *Harvard Theological Review*, 1982, p. 18.

⁷ Bultmann's polemic against objectivising modes of thought provides, I believe, the key to his entire system. It is derived from Herrmann's relationalism in which faith arises out of a pre-cognitive state of the self in relation to God. Both Herrmann and Bultmann are implacably opposed to any suggestion that faith is grounded in the assent of the intellect to propositional knowledge. This provides the setting for Bultmann's treatment of the faith-history problem and even pervades his exegesis.

believer. It refers to the function of the Cross in bringing him into a radically new relationship with God.

(3) The third motivation behind the radical interpretation concerns the application of historical criticism to the NT. It is argued that the sort of evidence required to reconstruct an historically authentic outline of the empty tomb narratives and the appearance stories is simply not available and that this merely underlines how far it is from the intention of the writers to supply us with empirical evidence for Christian belief.⁸

The radical interpretation can point out that in the resurrection narratives the gospels do not reflect eye-witness accounts of historical events. At Mark 16 within the space of eight verses there are several considerations which count against the historicity of the narrative. The motive of the women in going to the tomb is problematic. It is unclear why they would anoint a body, two days dead in the Palestinian climate, which had already been dressed and entombed. And would not the sudden thought that they require someone to move the stone have occurred to them beforehand and not just on arrival at the tomb? Moreover, the appearance and message of the angel give a presumption in favour of the view that here we are dealing with mythological and legendary traits. And finally, the concluding words of the gospel (if the gospel is understood to have ended at v. 8) can hardly be taken literally. If the women had indeed kept silent, neither the disciples nor the evangelist would have known of what had happened. We seem to be dealing here with the expression of some apologetic or theological intention and not with a straightforward concern to report the historical details.

This trend is strengthened by an analysis of the parallels. Matthew 28.1-15 represents a considerable development of the empty tomb narrative which is best explained by his apologetic concern to refute the Jewish polemic that the disciples stole the body. Luke's departures from the Marcan text might be explicable in terms of his own special interest in locating the Easter events in and around Jerusalem. Thus the angel's forecast of an appearance in Galilee is transmuted into a reminiscence of Jesus' words while still in Galilee and the omission of Salome in favour of Joanna can be explained by the previous mention of Joanna at 8.3. John's empty tomb narrative reveals similarities and differences from the synoptics which suggest that his material is, in

⁸ Many recent treatments of the resurrection begin with a careful examination of the historical background to the sources, e.g. Schillebeeckx's *Jesus* (Collins, London, 1979).

some measure, independent.⁹ And the way in which it is integrated with the specific concerns of the Fourth Gospel merely underlines the fluidity of the tradition and the impossibility of setting the narratives side by side in order to recreate an authentic sequence of events.

Similar conclusions are drawn, *mutatis mutandis*, with regard to the appearance stories. The narrative of Matthew 28.16-20 displays distinctively Matthean words and themes¹⁰ and the words of commission seem to belong to a relatively late stage in the history of the tradition with the reference to the Gentile mission, the triadic formula, and the receding of the Parousia into the distant future. The narrative of Luke 24.36ff. is framed in terms of the specifically Lukan theology. The resurrection period is a transitional phase which looks forward to the Ascension, Pentecost and the beginning of the church's history.¹¹ The appearance to the disciples at John 20.19-23 provides a dramatic contrast to Luke's scheme. The cross has already been highlighted as Jesus' supreme moment of exaltation and in resonance with this we find that the events of resurrection, the coming of the spirit, and ascension have been compressed into a period of about twenty-four hours. Bultmann shows very elegantly how the Evangelist makes use of the sequence of events in Chapter 20 to highlight his central concerns.¹²

All these considerations advanced by the radical interpretation lend weight to the argument that the Easter narratives should be seen not as attempts to verify faith on the basis of historical evidence but as expressions or explorations of what faith involves. We might then say that the narratives represent the symptoms rather than the causes of Christian faith.

In this manner historical criticism can lend itself to a quasi-idealist treatment of the resurrection. Its primary denotation is not an objective mind-independent act of God upon the dead Jesus but the coming into being of a new faith. The 'eschatological' existence of the believer is not the correlate of Jesus' resurrection but is actually to be identified with it. To describe this account as idealist, however, is not to suggest that the resurrection is the subjective creation of the human

⁹ cf. R. H. Fuller, *The Formation Of The Resurrection Narratives* (SPCK, London, 1972), pp. 131ff.

¹⁰ cf. the essay by G. Barth in *Tradition And Interpretation In Matthew*, ed. Bornkamm, Barth and Held (SCM, London, 1963), pp. 131-7.

¹¹ 'Luke's resurrection is not an end in itself but a point of transition.' C. F. Evans, *Resurrection And The New Testament* (SCM, London, 1970), p. 96.

¹² *The Gospel of John* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1971), pp. 681ff.

subject. For all its ideal character in Bultmann, it is no less a gift of God, an imparting of the divine grace. The idealism is reflected in the fact that God's gift of resurrection has a dispositional rather than an antecedently objective character. It is as if the reality of the resurrection is only brought into being by the rise of faith, yet what is created is of God's making rather than our own.

Yet there are other textual considerations which militate against the radical interpretation. At 1 Cor. 15, Paul seems to do exactly what Bultmann says he should not be doing. He refers his readers back to a received tradition which has been passed down to him and which is among the things of first importance for the preaching of the gospel. This tradition specifies in a series of formulae the bare fact of the appearances of Jesus to various individuals and groups.¹³ In the preamble to the formula at verses 1-2, rather than introducing an incautious *argumentum ad hominem*, Paul lays careful and deliberate stress on the tradition. There are several reasons for treating it as trustworthy. Its formal and stylised structure suggests a tradition that has been carefully preserved. Its primary importance for the preaching of the gospel indicates both that Paul must have received it early on in his apostolic career, if not in Damascus then perhaps in Jerusalem, and also that it could hardly have been other than a major topic in any conversations he had with Peter. Thus Paul would have been familiar with a formula whose origin is likely to have been within only a few years of the events depicted.¹⁴

The events to which he refers are those of crucifixion, burial, resurrection and appearance, and the logic of the formula at verses 3b-4 indicates that the resurrection is conceived of as an event in the personal destiny of Jesus which made possible his subsequent appearances to Peter and the others. There is a complete continuity of identity through death, burial, resurrection and appearance. The language suggests that Jesus' significance for faith is a consequence of his being personally raised from the dead. Its reference is to an event in

¹³ According to his method of *Sachkritik* Bultmann concludes that Paul in the moment of polemic departs from his main intention, *Faith And Understanding* (SCM, London, 1969), pp. 83-4.

¹⁴ C. H. Dodd has written: 'No statement could be more emphatic or unambiguous. In making it Paul is exposing himself to the criticism of resolute opponents, who would have been ready to point to any flaw in his credentials or in his presentation of the common tradition.' 'The Appearances Of The Risen Christ: An Essay In Form Criticism Of The Gospels' in *Studies In The Gospels*, ed. Nineham (Blackwell, Oxford, 1957), p. 28.

the destiny of Jesus which makes possible his subsequent appearance for faith. The resurrection is here construed as the condition of the rise of faith rather than being assimilated to the latter.

This criticism of the radical interpretation is reinforced by observing the way in which the name 'Jesus' functions in the kerygma. In denoting an active subject the kerygma presupposes the resurrection as an event in the destiny of Jesus. He remains an individual who exists independently and *extra nos*. Hence the resurrection must refer not to the rise of faith in the believer but to the enduring personal identity of Jesus. The risen Christ who acts as the agent of salvation is more than a reminiscence of the crucified Jesus which quickens new faith within the believer.

These observations show that much of the NT witness points away from the radical interpretation. In the light of this it is worth assessing it in terms of its second characteristic motivation — the fundamental cleavage between faith and history. The lack of any internal relationship between faith and the empirical world is acutely present in Bultmann's theology of the resurrection. The evidence of an empty tomb or a set of appearances cannot verify the claims of the kerygma. Yet it is worth asking whether the situation is construed in terms of a false set of alternatives. That the appearances cannot function as a proof-miracle that Jesus is the exalted Son of God whose presence imparts new life, does not entail that they are wholly irrelevant. They could function as necessary rather than sufficient conditions for faith. And if they were insufficient but necessary conditions they would not pose the same threat to existential commitment.

For Bultmann the empirical antecedents of the Easter faith are a matter only of historical conjecture; from a theological point of view they are quite irrelevant. The signs of God's action are manifested only in the existential life of the believer rather than in the empirical world. The only miracle is the miracle of faith and by affirming the irrelevance of the empirical we bring this into sharper focus. This assertion that the true miracle is the miracle of faith has a profound attraction. In its exclusive emphasis upon the moment of belief it has a certain purity of insight. There is nothing spare or surfeit that can distract our attention or indulge our sentiments. The gospel can only be attested existentially and not by framing hypotheses about the obscure historical circumstances lying behind 1 Cor. 15 or the gospel narratives. Yet for all its simplicity and force the position is in danger of becoming an empty formalism.

A coherent account of how the Christian faith arose is a matter of theological importance. Any attempt to explain and justify a belief cannot ignore the causal conditions which gave rise to it. To say that the new faith of the disciples was the consequence of God's power kindled within them after the crucifixion is not only to make a theological proposal but is also to commit oneself to a historical explanation. It implies that the appearance stories and the empty tomb narratives are inessential both for elucidating the content of Christian faith and for explaining how that faith took a specific form. Yet this negative judgment raises certain questions. Why should the kerygma always and everywhere have proclaimed the personal resurrection as prior to the rise of faith in his followers? And why should the formula of 1 Cor. 15 have assumed theological importance for Paul who is otherwise uninterested in the tradition concerning the earthly Jesus?

Willi Marxsen's *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth* provides a response to these questions while still remaining within the radical position. Central to his thesis is the conviction that the activity of Jesus of Nazareth goes on after his death in the lives of his followers. It is to this that the gospel writers testify and the only relevant evidence is the existence of Christian faith.¹⁵ The resurrection stories are imaginative ways of expressing Christian faith while the list recited by Paul points to the status of the original believers who occupy a special role in the early community. Yet there is a crucial ambivalence in Marxsen's presentation which makes his theological proposals highly elusive. The dictum that 'the activity of Jesus goes on' can be interpreted in either a weak or a strong sense. It can mean that the activity which Jesus had initiated is taken up and continued by his disciples, or it can mean that Jesus remains an active subject who continues to impart his presence. Marxsen's account trades on this ambivalence. If we opt for the weak sense of the expression then clearly all that is required for the resurrection is the existence of faith. If we opt for the strong sense we seem to imply a personal resurrection of Jesus. Both weak and strong senses possess their respective advantages and disadvantages. The advantage of the weak interpretation is its simplicity both historically and theologically. Its disadvantage is that it does not express both what the gospel narratives seem to be saying

¹⁵ 'The evangelists want to show that the activity of Jesus goes on. It goes on in spite of his death on the cross; and it remains the activity of the same Jesus who was once active on earth', op. cit., p. 77.

and the way in which the Christian tradition has interpreted their relevance for faith. On the other hand the disadvantage of the strong interpretation is the epistemological problem of what would justify statements about the enduring identity of Jesus if we adopt a negative attitude towards the historicity of the narratives. Its advantage is that it offers a more full-blooded interpretation of the kerygma. It seems to me that Marxsen's account equivocates between the two positions without resolving the problems of either.

Marxsen suggests that the disciples felt themselves called to a new faith similar to that practised by the earthly Jesus. This, in turn, gave rise to the proclamation that 'Christ is risen'.¹⁶ Yet this proposal still leaves a twofold problem for the radical position. By reflection upon the message, example or self-understanding of Jesus one might be drawn into a deeper religious faith but it is not clear why this should be expressed in the form 'Jesus is calling me to faith and has therefore risen from the dead'. Why should faith take the primitive form of confessing 'Christ is risen' if this is only an inference from faith? And, secondly, why should the NT reverse the logical order and call upon people to believe because Christ is risen rather than conclude that Christ is risen because people continue to believe in Jesus after his death? This point is brought into focus by Schillebeeckx's criticism of Marxsen.

If the exegetes and theologians who start from the death of Jesus as the point of disjunction . . . want to convince me, in this regard, they must first show me why, when John the Baptist had been beheaded, his movement was able simply to continue on Jewish ground — as if that death entailed no break at all.¹⁷

The criticism of the radical interpretation as represented by Marxsen is that it neither explains how faith arose nor, more importantly, why it took the peculiar form it did. Insofar as the resurrection refers to the continuing identity of Jesus it is not possible to treat it simply as an event in the believer's life. Yet if its primary reference is to an event in the destiny of Jesus it becomes difficult to see what would justify this. Even a divinely inspired reflection upon the significance of his death does not constitute a sufficient explanation for a belief in his enduring identity, presence and activity.

At this point we could opt for an economy version of the radical interpretation by dispensing with any notion of the continuing activity of Jesus and of a unique action of God either upon Jesus or the believer.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 128.

¹⁷ *Jesus*, p. 393.

The resurrection could then be recast as a symbol which speaks of the significance of Jesus' life and death. He represents an authentic human existence and to believe in his resurrection is to allow this paradigm to regulate one's own existence.¹⁸ The theology of the resurrection would then be freed from any obscure metaphysics, historical difficulties and allegations of Christian imperialism. Indeed the concept of resurrection could virtually be eliminated from this description of the Christian faith.

The economy of this interpretation has much to commend it, yet it has drastic consequences for the twin components of christology mentioned at the outset. Of these components one is removed while the other is placed in jeopardy. The presence of Jesus to the believer is now only an elliptical way of speaking of the functional value of his life and death. And this in turn raises a query about attaching a unique and exclusive importance to one brief portion of history. Why not allow other models of human existence a similar instrumental value instead of placing all the emphasis upon this one segment of history? If we wish to retain these twin components of christology we could consider whether a liberal interpretation of the resurrection fares better than the radical one.

The liberal interpretation

The liberal interpretation is represented by Schillebeeckx, Küng, Lampe, Mackey and others.¹⁹ Its characteristics include a dissatisfaction with the radical view, an emphasis upon the appearance stories as explanation, a historical scepticism about the empty tomb, and an uneasiness about any notion of the miraculous.

Schillebeeckx's account centres upon the notion of explanation. The interpretation of the resurrection must satisfy the criterion of rendering the disciples' faith intelligible. Since the concept of explanation is central to the task of interpretation it is worth asking what is implied by it.

There is a style of conservative apologetic which argues from the existence of the disciples' faith to the miracle of the resurrection. The truth of the resurrection is demonstrated by the existence of faith since it is the only available adequate explanation. Unless we presuppose the

¹⁸ This is the position that arises out of Ogden's revision of Bultmann.

¹⁹ Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*; Hans Küng, *On Being A Christian* (Collins, London, 1974); Lampe and Mackinnon, *The Resurrection: A Dialogue*; James Mackey, *Jesus: The Man And The Myth* (SCM, London, 1979).

miracle we cannot account for the rise of faith. Thus described, this line of reasoning is fallacious for reasons of a Humean sort. It attempts to explain the occurrence of one improbable event by postulating another event which is even more improbable. On inductive grounds the resurrection of a dead person is intrinsically highly improbable, and therefore it can never be rational to postulate such an event as the explanation of a phenomenon which although remarkable is not so improbable as the resurrection. This crude piece of apologetic will always be vulnerable to Hume's criticism concerning the mutual destruction of arguments.²⁰

Yet while this is a fallacious argument it does not entail that the notion of explanation is wholly irrelevant in the theology of the resurrection. If we have two rival theories one of which can explain what the other leaves unexplained, then, *ceteris paribus*, the former is to be preferred. And since the interpretation of the resurrection includes both historical and theological factors the ability to explain will be among the criteria of adequacy. Any alternative to the radical view must be historically plausible and theologically constructive and these are the two desiderata that Schillebeeckx sets himself.²¹

He argues that the stimulus to faith was a set of resurrection visions disclosing the continuing activity of Jesus. These events lie behind the record of the appearances and fill the hiatus between the death of Jesus and the rise of faith. From out of these experiences arises the conviction that Jesus is risen from the dead and is now present to the believer. Yet if we ask the question posed earlier, 'Is the resurrection an event in the life of Jesus or an event in the life of the believer?', I am not clear what Schillebeeckx's answer should be. The way in which he interprets the narratives suggests that they refer primarily to the religious experiences of the disciples. They are experiences of divine grace and forgiveness which are expressed by saying that Jesus must be alive and present. On the other hand, his language about 'renewed fellowship' with Jesus seems to imply that the resurrection is an event in the personal destiny of Jesus. The juxtaposition of the following two passages brings this out.

May it not be that Simon Peter — and indeed the Twelve — arrived via their concrete experience of forgiveness after Jesus' death, encountered as grace and discussed among themselves (as

²⁰ *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Selby-Bigge (Third Edition, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975), Section X, 'Miracles', p. 116.

²¹ *op.cit.*, p. 380.

they remembered Jesus' sayings about, among other things, the gracious God) as the 'evidence for belief': the Lord is alive? . . . It is the individual's experience of new being that imparts to faith the assurance that Jesus is alive or is the coming judge of the world.²²

In other words, spiritual contact with Jesus, ruptured by death, has been restored: they can once more address each other in intimate, personal terms, death notwithstanding. Death has not shattered living communication with Jesus: that is, he continues after his death to offer those who are his a fellowship belonging to and constituting life. In this fellowship believers experience Jesus as brought back from the realm of the dead, that is, as the One who lives or as the One who has risen again. After his death, intercourse, conversation, with him continues — in a very personal sense.²³

An attempt is thus made to explain the disciples' visions by assimilating them to a more general category of decisive religious experience. Yet how exactly could an experience of the divine grace be identical with renewed spiritual fellowship with a dead person? If it is said that the resurrection is an inference from the experience(s), or is an interpretation of it, then the question arises as to what justifies the inference. To speak of a religious experience of grace and forgiveness as a personal encounter with a dead person seems either to be an elliptical way of speaking or else an extravagant use of rhetoric. In this respect Schillebeeckx fails to satisfy the two criteria he sets down. He cannot explain why the Christian faith should speak in irreducible terms about a personal resurrection of Jesus nor how the disciples came to believe in this.²⁴

Similar difficulties attend other versions of the liberal interpretation. Hans Küng postulates the conversion experiences of the disciples to explain the rise of the resurrection faith.²⁵ Yet the form and content he ascribes to these experiences undermine their function as explanations of that faith. It is a striking feature of his account that while he wants to

²² *ibid.*, p. 391.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 345.

²⁴ A possible response might be to argue that given those experiences of the disciples, what explains their issuing in the resurrection faith is their conjunction with prevailing categories and beliefs. Yet this runs into the difficulty that the apocalyptic idea of the resurrection of the Last Day as something that could occur in advance for one person had no precedent in Jewish thought. Schillebeeckx makes this point himself (*ibid.*, p. 395-6).

²⁵ *op. cit.*, p. 352.

stress the discontinuity of Jesus' resurrection with other prevailing ideas of resurrection, those experiences which are supposed to explain this discontinuity are construed in terms quite continuous with other vocational, conversion and faith-motivating experiences. There is, on the one hand, a desire to affirm something that is radically unique and without parallel and, on the other, a desire to make what justifies that affirmation more plausible by reducing it to an instance of a general pattern. Insofar as the appearance stories become visions belonging to a general category they cannot do the work that K  ng requires of them.

The fundamental ambivalence of the liberal interpretation can be seen in James Mackey's elegant presentation of it.²⁶ His answer to the question of whether the resurrection is an event in the destiny of Jesus or in the believer seems to be 'both'. This is achieved, I think, by the conflation of the occurrence of the event in itself with the implications and consequences that the event has. This enables him to speak of the resurrection as an event for Jesus himself while insisting that its principal meaning is the existential significance of the life and death of Jesus. It is illustrated in his tabulation of the dominant themes in Paul's understanding of the resurrection.²⁷ The series of verbs that he employs enables this conflation to be made. Thus: (1) the phrase 'the resurrection of Jesus' is *aligned* with Paul's vocational experience; (2) the conviction of Jesus' resurrection *coincides* with a sense of new power and life; (3) the resurrection *means* that we also can hope to be raised; (4) the resurrection of Jesus *implies* that Jesus can be expected to return. Finally, he notes that 'the most frequently recurring theme' is the personal resurrection of Jesus himself. Yet it is surely the case that if we analyse the sense and reference of the phrase 'the resurrection of Jesus' we are seen to be talking primarily about an event in the destiny of Jesus prior to any implications it may have for vocation, a sense of new life, and a hope in our own eventual resurrection. This is not one theme amongst others but is the condition and explanation upon which all these others are based.

This conflation is reflected in a further ambivalence surrounding Mackey's central notion of Jesus as spirit.

He (Paul) understands by the resurrection of Jesus primarily the Christian experience of Jesus as Spirit or Lord in the lives of his followers.²⁸

²⁶ op. cit., Chapter Three.

²⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 100ff.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 97.

It is not clear whether this is the consequence or the meaning itself of Jesus' resurrection. Correlated with this is the difficulty of assessing whether the experience of Jesus as spirit is intended in a strong substantive sense which would require a personal resurrection as its condition, or in a weak sense which would correspond to a sense of divine grace created by reflection upon the story of Jesus. It is, I think, by trading upon this ambivalence that Mackey reaches his conclusion which he sees as both an adequate interpretation of the NT and a constructive theological proposal.

The central and principal element of this resurrection preaching, I am now saying, is *the* myth of the death of Jesus. It is *the* statement, in the form of narrated symbols, of the deep significance for human kind of the death of this man.²⁹

If this is the principal element of the resurrection then it is more accurately described as an event in the life of the believer and the liberal position collapses back into the radical one. And if we cannot rest with the liberal position there seem to be two alternatives. Either we return to the economy version of the radical interpretation or else we reconsider the possibility of a more traditional interpretation.

The traditional interpretation

In this interpretation the twin claims about the continuing presence of Jesus and the unique significance of his life and death are sustained by a stronger theology of the resurrection. The condition for the presence of Jesus is his continuing identity beyond his death and this entails that the resurrection is primarily an event for Jesus himself rather than the believer. Unlike the economy version of the radical interpretation the resurrection here occupies a constitutive place in christology.

The resurrection is thus affirmed as an event in the destiny of Jesus. This is achieved by understanding the empty tomb as a necessary condition which enables us to make sense of a personal resurrection of Jesus prior to the rise of faith. As a necessary or negative condition the empty tomb, in conjunction with some appropriate account of the appearances, has the function, not so much of verifying faith, as contributing to its overall shape and balance. We can only make sense of the claim about the continuing presence and activity of Jesus if the

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 117.

resurrection is conceived of as an event in his destiny alongside the crucifixion. Thus Barth writes:

For unless Christ's resurrection was a resurrection of the body, we have no guarantee that it was the decisively acting Subject Jesus Himself who rose from the dead.³⁰

And, more recently, Rowan Williams:

Something must have provided a first stimulus, and more importantly, a structure of presuppositions within which subsequent experiences could be organised.³¹

While the empty tomb cannot be a sufficient condition for belief in the resurrection this does not preclude it from functioning as a negative and necessary condition.³² As an empirical correlate of the resurrection it points away from itself while contributing to the overall shape and structure of the faith. The empty tomb and the appearances thus provide the matrix within which the event of the resurrection is grasped and articulated.

The most immediate objection to this is posed by historical criticism which raises difficulties for any confident judgment about the tomb of Jesus. But before responding to this objection a preliminary point may be made. In as much as the empty tomb was once thought to form the basis of an argument to the resurrection it required the strongest set of warrants. We have already seen why these warrants are unavailable. The gospel narratives simply cannot be assimilated to eye-witness reports about the empty tomb. If, however, the empty tomb is to be treated neither as a proof-miracle nor as the justification of the resurrection, but only as a negative condition, it will not be a matter of acute concern if the historical warrants for it are less conclusive than they were once thought to be. The most troubling consideration will be the claim that the narratives have no historical basis whatsoever since they are to be explained as either legends or myths created by the early community.

It is sometimes noted that, with the exception of John 20.8, the

³⁰ *Church Dogmatics*, III.2 (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1958), p. 448.

³¹ *Resurrection* (Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1982), p. 106.

³² To argue that the empty tomb is irrelevant because it cannot verify the resurrection is a familiar *non sequitur*. Cf. Küng: 'the empty tomb alone even in the light of the stories cannot provide any proof of the resurrection or justify any hope of the resurrection. . . . Faith in the risen Christ therefore is independent of the empty tomb.' (op. cit., pp. 365-366).

discovery of the empty tomb is in itself never the occasion for believing. Belief is evoked only through the message of the angels or the appearance of Jesus himself. At Mark 16.5 the empty tomb rather than causing puzzlement or enabling any inference to the resurrection is simply the setting for the angelophany.³³ In this sense the resurrection is already presupposed in the telling of the story. Similarly in Luke the perplexity of the women is only alleviated by the appearance of the twin messengers who subtly turn attention away from the tomb by their question, 'Why do you seek the living among the dead?' In this manner the empty tomb becomes a symbol for the resurrection through the resonance of these terse, enigmatic words.

Yet it is not clear what conclusions should be drawn from this. If the empty tomb is employed as a symbol, and the narratives function as myth, does this entail that they were originally devised by the community for that purpose? If a narrative is used as a vehicle for proclamation, rather than as a straight report of a sequence of events, does this necessarily entail the absence of a historical core? It could even be that there is a valid argument running in the opposite direction, viz., that in order to function adequately as vehicles of proclamation these narratives must be modelled upon some historical reminiscence. This would leave room for the possibility that the narrative is based upon an account of a journey by some women to a tomb which is found to be empty.

It is also worth noting that Mark and Luke's sensitive treatment of the empty tomb will tend to disconfirm the hypothesis that it is an apologetic legend designed to verify the resurrection. Since neither Mark 16.5 nor Luke 24.3 display any explicit sign of apologetic motive this counts against the view that they are legendary fabrications.³⁴ If the Marcan account was created around such a legend one might have expected certain features to appear which are in fact absent. No miracle is itself related: there is no marvellous appearance to explain the tomb's being empty; and no explicit apologetic thrust. The absence of these features in Mark is highlighted by Matthew's amendments and additions at a later stage in the tradition which do betray a tendency toward the crudely miraculous and apologetic (as to a greater degree does the Gospel of Peter). Moreover if the story is an apologetic

³³ This is emphasised by Evans, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

³⁴ This is well argued by Hans von Campenhausen in 'The Events of Easter and the Empty Tomb' in *Tradition and Life in the Early Church* (Collins, London, 1968), pp. 59-61, 75f.

legend it is hard to explain why the only witnesses in Mark 16 are three women who by Jewish law were incompetent to testify.

A further problem about assimilating the narratives to the status of either legend or myth concerns the state of the disciples' minds. If the notion of a resurrection from the grave was a more likely option than a non-corporeal rising for the first-century Jewish mind this will count against the assumption that the state of Jesus' tomb would have been irrelevant to the primitive Christians.³⁵ At the very least we have to reckon with the fact that nowhere in the NT is there any trace of an attempt to explain the compatibility of the resurrection with an extant corpse. Indeed the (admittedly late) evidence of Matthew's narrative suggests that the empty tomb was acknowledged by Jewish opponents.

It may of course have been the case that the disciples had no positive knowledge of the circumstances of Jesus' burial and the whereabouts of his grave. This suggestion calls into question the authenticity of the burial by Joseph at Mark 15.42-8. Yet despite the possibility that this account is legendary, being designed to soften the ignominy of a common grave, there is a strong argument to the effect that the deliberate account of a burial by a notable Jew whose name is specifically mentioned is likely to be historical.³⁶ If the account of the burial is authentic it becomes harder to argue that either the disciples mistakenly thought the tomb was empty or else had no interest in the matter.³⁷

These considerations show that it is not easy to dismiss the empty tomb story as either legend or myth. They suggest that the matrix of Mark 16.1-8, the discovery of an empty tomb by some women, may have some historical basis. While there is no means of reconstructing a detailed account of a sequence of events the real possibility that the tomb was empty is sufficient for a traditional interpretation of the resurrection. It functions as a negative condition which contributes to the overall shape and character of the resurrection faith.

³⁵ For a measured discussion of the concept of resurrection at that time, see Evans, *op. cit.*, Chapter One.

³⁶ cf. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1963), p. 274.

³⁷ This apologetic thrust should be confined, I think, to combating negative judgments about the historical core of the narratives. If it is allowed a wider scope it easily degenerates into a crude argument for the resurrection as 'best explanation' and thus becomes a distraction from the central christological issues raised by the story. For a sensitive exploration of the psychological state of the disciples, see Sebastian Moore's two articles. 'The Resurrection: A Confusing Paradigm Shift', *Downside Review* 1980; 'An Empty Tomb Revisited', *Downside Review* 1981.

In a similar fashion the appearance stories occupy an important place in the matrix of the faith. Instead of assimilating them to standard patterns of Christian experience the traditional interpretation locates them in the constitutive framework which makes that experience possible. This is supported by the context of 1 Cor. 15.3-11. The intention of Paul seems to be to adduce evidence upon which faith is affirmed. These are the indispensable terms on which the gospel is preached, and if they did not hold it would be falsified.

As with the empty tomb narratives the appearance stories cannot be reconstructed to resemble eye-witness reports, yet neither can they be reduced to legendary or mythological creations. Certain apologetic motifs can be readily discerned in these narratives — a tendency to verify the resurrection by stressing the corporeality of the risen Jesus and the authorisation of the church's mission. Yet while these motifs are present this does not rule out their being constructed around the bare fact of an appearance of Jesus to his followers, and there is already a presumption in favour of this in the light of 1 Cor. 15.³⁸ The emphasis in the stories (with the exception of Matthew 28.16ff.) is generally upon the appearance and recognition of the crucified Jesus. These manifestations emphasise his humanity whereas had they been constructed on the model of a miraculous theophany one would have expected the emphasis to be more on supernatural signs.

For the traditional interpretation the Easter narratives form an integral part of the story of Jesus. Together with the accounts of his ministry, passion and death they depict his identity. Even in the Fourth Gospel the Easter story is narrated with a powerful realism and emotional vitality. The mere fact of the Evangelist's recording these stories and integrating them into the climax of the gospel raises the question as to how indispensable they are for the description of Jesus' identity. In the traditional interpretation the resurrection is primarily an event for Jesus rather than the believer. As such it renders his identity to the believer and enables him or her to know his presence as the story is understood. And here lies the connexion between the resurrection and the strong christological claim about the presence of Jesus. The gospel narrative describes the resurrection as something

³⁸ There are traces of an initial appearance to Peter at Mark 16.7, Luke 24.34, and in the narrative of John 21. Luke, though he knows of an appearance to Peter, has not taken the liberty of creating a story around this detail. Thus Dodd writes: 'However ready he may have been to "write up" traditional material which had reached him, and however great the skill he displays in doing so, he was clearly not willing to create a whole story out of a bare statement like this' (op. cit., pp. 34-5).

that happens to Jesus, and, as the risen one, Jesus is able to impart his presence to the believer. The empirical correlates of the empty tomb and the appearances provide the space in which this can be grasped. They are the signs which form an integral part of the story of Jesus' resurrection, and in understanding who he is in that story he becomes present. This connexion between the identity of the crucified and risen Jesus and his presence to the believer is the central theme of Hans Frei's *The Identity of Jesus Christ*. He writes:

It is precisely the fiction-like quality of the whole narrative, from upper room to resurrection appearances, that serves to bring the identity of Jesus sharply before us and to make him accessible to us. . . . To know *who* he is in connection with what took place is to know *that* he is. This is the climax of the story and its claim. What the accounts are saying, in effect, is that the being and identity of Jesus in the resurrection are such that his nonresurrection becomes inconceivable.³⁹

Hence to ask whether a belief in the resurrection is grounded in religious experience or in the historical testimony of the gospels is to pose a false antithesis. To know the presence of Jesus is also to understand his identity as it is narrated in the story of his life, death and resurrection. A belief in the gospel story is thus wedded to a sense of Christ's presence; the shape and content of one's experience is determined by the nature of the story. Thus the interpretation of the resurrection is linked to wider considerations in christology.

I have tried to argue that two central components of christology are tied to the interpretation of the resurrection, and in this latter section I have tried to show that these can only be sustained in their strong sense by a more or less traditional interpretation. In this respect such an interpretation may still have something to commend it. Its most plausible rival was found to be an economy version of the radical position which has reductionist implications for christology and theology generally. If however a stronger form of christological realism is to be sustained something resembling a traditional understanding of the resurrection will need to be defended.

³⁹ *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1974), p. 145.

DAVID FERGUSSON

59c Douglas House
Cumbernauld